

The New Secret

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Unlike societies in the 1970s, our social body is defined by leaks; everything leaks, from surveillance tapes, wire taps, nudity on a remote beach, books, music, medicinal drugs and lives. Secrets and leaks are no longer governed by the state; there is an egalitarianism of secrets. It is in this social milieu, and within a system where truths of varying intensities are produced by the mode of leak effected, that WikiLeaks appears.

Knowledge and certainty belong to two different categories.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*

The possibilities generated by WikiLeaks for the fight for freedom surge from a classical conception of the secret: a secret is the infrastructural containment of a truth which has disruptive potential. Such a truth can be theological, moral, or familial. This containment can be in a physical location with vaults and guns (physical security) or it can be inside bacteria (biological information storage and retrieval) or a factorisation algorithm (cryptographic securing of information). The traditional infrastructure of the secret presupposes three things.

(1) *The secret has to be extractable by someone who knows the procedure.* This entails every possible violation of the protocols and the cryptographic procedures since an irretrievable truth never existed. In a certain sense, Alexander released the secret of the Gordian knot with a cut. Today, if instead of working out a mathematical way of opening an encrypted

allowing anyone outside the privileged caste to access it. WikiLeaks itself caused disruption immediately after the embassy cable leaks:²

Following the publication of excoriating leaked cables from the US mission in Tunisia, about the corruption and excess of the ruling family, tens of thousands of protesters rose up and overthrew the country's hated President, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali.

(3) *The right to secrecy is restricted hierarchically.* In the family, the father can have secrets and the daughter can have none. At the level of nations, the state must possess all the secrets, implying that the citizen can have none. State organisations themselves, such as the military, have created a hierarchical order of secrecy – restricted, confidential, secret, top-secret. Information would be revealed to people with requisite clearance on a “need to know” basis; you might not ever know of the existence of the secret for which you have clearance unless it is deemed necessary.

State Secrets, Citizen Leaks

To be able to possess something which has sufficient value to be a secret is precisely domination by secret. Our assessment of power hierarchy is indexed by the infrastructure of the secret. The state has the maximum secrecy and it legislatively re-

mathematical way or opening an encrypted text, a cryptographer steals the password, the secret would still reveal the truth which it was.¹

(2) *The secret is a truth which is perceived as potentially disruptive.* Even if something is true, such as “the king of France is bald”, it is trivia and has no “disruptivity” unless it indicates a significant consequence, say the imminent collapse of his health. The disruptivity of a truth implies its power to alter the location of a problematic that defines society at a particular moment. Hence the beholders of secrets claim that the secret is maintained in order to prevent the dislocation of society, or for its security. Classical Greek theatre shows these games of secret and revelation where the disruption takes place in the family and also in society as the extension of the family. In ancient Indian society, the knowledge of the Vedas was considered “sacred” and secret at the same time, and it was maintained thus by not

maximum secrecy and it legislatively restricts the acquisition of the secret infrastructure by anyone else.³ Not only does the state possess the maximum secret infrastructure and restrict its use by others, it also, hence, possesses everyone else’s secrets. Businesses are next in line and the civilians must speak the truth, always.

The political charge produced by WikiLeaks is determined by these indices. When a non-state organisation extracts secrets from the secret infrastructure of a state, it displays a confusion in the indices of the hierarchy of secrets. In this way, WikiLeaks provides a sense of freedom from the tyranny of secrets.

Leaking state secrets is not new in itself. Relations between states consist of possession and dispossession of secrets. The transaction of secrecy is permitted by existing diplomatic protocols. Espionage entertainment in the cold war era provided the safe thrill of legitimised extractions of secrets, which included extraction of

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individuals in the form of defectors. The thrill was certainly derivative of the crime performed since it is prohibited to reveal state secrets; however, theft is encouraged when its target is the secret infrastructure of the enemy state. We shall call this the *espionage problematic* of secrets, defined as the specific conditions under which the secret infrastructure is maintained by states in a hierarchy. This problematic does not disregard the hierarchy of secrets. Until recently, it determined our relation to secrets and their revelation. According to the espionage problematic, transfers of secrets take place between states. A secret transferred from the enemy state is assumed to be of value in defending the whole of the state.

However, in cases where a civilian leaks secrets from the state of which he or she is a citizen, the assumption is that only the enemy state can benefit from it; hence, every civilian is potentially a mole. Having

incident outside the espionage problematic. Interestingly, during the course of his trial, it was found that his phone had been secretly tapped since in the hierarchy of secrets, the civilian has no need for secrets away from the state.⁵

Industrial espionage receives less attention due to the assumption that such thefts of secrets are a crime within the crime of capitalism. However, when the leaks of defence technologies are involved, they become valuable truths. The changes in the economic hierarchy of the world imply that countries in the Far East have been consistently interested in the economic activities of western powers.

Some of the secrets revealed by WikiLeaks were expected; others have been eagerly anticipated, in particular those regarding the Iraq invasion. However, there have been many difficult secrets as well, depending on the point of view, for instance: ⁶

Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who did not come out well in the disclosures

infrastructure must be the truth. The modality of disposing truths in this manner, through their secretion, is very potent.

A new politics has evidently been opened, that of the production of secrets and their revelation as truth, with all the attendant consequences.

Curveball

The *leak problematic* of secrets is new; it is the problematic of our time. WikiLeaks was preceded in this manner by the us during the run-up to the Iraq invasion, in an incident that shows the production and deployment of secrets. The Iraqi defector Rafid Ahmed Alwan al-Janabi, code-named Curveball, testified to the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Apparently, his handlers suspected the truth of his statements. Later, Curveball expressed surprise when he learnt of the invasion of Iraq, announced on the basis of his own revealed truth. His statements were accepted as true

every civilian is potentially a mole. Having a relation to secret is taking a position in a war relation of friend and enemy. Espionage thrillers never assume that the secret infrastructure of the parent state might contain items whose leak might be politically relevant to its own people. This problematic is evoked even now in state responses to WikiLeaks, from the United States (us) to Iran; the leaks are of value only to their respective enemy states or organisations. The thrill expressed in news reports on Julian Assange's achievement, too, is quite similar – he brought secrets to light. Of course, this light is not one that falls upon the conference table in a room which exists in a secret bunker. Rather, his act is the light which makes the secret infrastructure transparent, a beam of light shone into the bunkers, the illumination of the espionage problematic of secrets.

In the past, too, leaks have been effected from within the hierarchy, passing from the state to its people. These leaks appeared as an aberration within the espionage problematic of secrecy. The Pentagon leaks are a case in point. In 1971, Daniel Ellsberg, a military analyst emplo-

who did not come out well in the disclosures of his regional unpopularity [...] claimed the us must have deliberately leaked its own files in a plot to discredit him.

We assume their truths only because we know that they have been held in secrecy and hence held to be true. The secret infrastructure of the us with its position as the major superpower, and hence the big state, is the evidence of valuable truths; therefore, what comes out of this secret

His statements were accepted as true since he came out of the secret infrastructure. As the us characterised the entirety of Iraq, here was a detailed first-hand account from an insider of the sinister and deceptive inner workings of Saddam's regime. Using this truth of great intensity provided by a defector, an invasion could be arranged. The most potent secret revealed by Collin Powell in his speech before the United Nations to seek



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Daniel Ellsberg, a military analyst employed by the RAND Corporation, leaked the Pentagon papers pertaining to decision-making in the Vietnam War.⁴ Ellsberg was charged under the espionage act. That is, state actors refused to see it as an

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COMMENTARY

legitimacy for the invasion was Curveball himself:⁷

We have first-hand descriptions of biological weapons factories on wheels [...] The source was an eyewitness – an Iraqi chemical engineer who supervised one of these facilities.

The code-name Curveball attests to truth. If the information “the king of France is bald” comes out of the secret infrastructure, it will have to be true, even if there is no king in France. The secret secretes the true: in the idiom of Oscar Wilde, the mask guarantees truth in the speech.⁸

A truth is valuable only if it is sufficient

egalitarianism of secrets. The leaks entertain us more than espionage.

The leak is the evidence of truth. Once a truth is produced by a leak, its intensity must be sustained. Its appearance from the cold is not enough for survival and circulation in the social body. A greater degree of truth is maintained if the revelation is intensely resisted. The resistance to Julian Assange and his organisation sustains the intensity of the revealed truth; it is the reproduction of the revealed as true. If this reproductive mechanism halts, the truth too will lose its intensity. Alongside its reproduction, the

offers us the chance to think anew our relation to this question in the same way that the night shines brightest in the dark.

NOTES

- 1 This is consistent with Kerckhoffs' principle which states that a secret should be strong enough to fall into the hands of the enemy and not be extracted, provided the pass key is out of the enemy's reach.
- 2 Leigh, David and Luke Harding (2011): *WikiLeaks: Inside Julian Assange's War On Secrecy* (London: Guardian Books), 247.
- 3 The legally available means of encryption for civilians presuppose that the state shall be able to decrypt it in a short duration of time. Also research on cryptography is a state privilege.

A truth is valuable only if it is sufficient for the secret infrastructure. That which comes out of secrecy is true. Secrecy is nominated as the evidence of truth. If it was a secret before its revelation through a war-like engagement with its mechanisms, then it is true. For us, truth corresponds in its intensity to the intensity of its revelation – the harder its extraction, the truer it is.

This intensive conception of truth is visible in the entertainment industry. The truths about celebrities lie not in their statements to the press, though these are still given, but rather in leaked videos, tapped phone conversations, photographs taken with telescopic zoom. The intensity of the truth is visible in the pixilation and blur in a photograph taken with telescopic zoom, audible in the shuffling noise generated by a concealed recording device. One is a celebrity insofar as one's life has been leaked. The entertainment industry is itself a leak industry. The intensive conception of truth provides also for varying degrees of thrill – from witnessing the truth about a life in a sex tape to gaining access to the lies of a state in the leaked

tensity. Alongside its reproduction, the effects of the truth are also visible, which do not align consistently with the manner of its production; the truths were produced in an antagonistic relation with the US secret infrastructure. Though the US resisted the leaks, some of them, at least, seem to favour the US in their truth-effects:⁹

The US secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, had previously denounced the leak of the cables [...] But the same leak was now helping to repair America's battered reputation in the Middle East, damaged by the Iraq war, and to advance the White House's lofty goals of democratisation and modernisation. Assange may have regarded the US as his enemy, but in this case [recent people's movements in the Middle East] he had unwittingly helped restore American influence in a place where it had lost credibility.

It should not be our effort to deny that Assange revealed secrets and that they were all true. But the appearance of WikiLeaks certainly changes our conception of secret and grants us an intensive conception of truth. Political action deriving from these truths is no longer possible if we assume a displaced prob-

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- 4 In an article titled "Like My Pentagon Papers, These Iraq War Logs Can't be Buried", Daniel Ellsberg (2010), *Guardian*, 25 October, wrote, "Nearly 40 years ago, I leaked the Pentagon papers – a top secret 7,000-page study of US decision-making during the Vietnam war which revealed repeated lies and cover-ups by the administration". Viewed on 24 February 2011: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/oct/25/pentagon-papers-iraq-war-logs-wikiLeaks>
- 5 News Services (2006): "Judge William Byrne; Ended Trial Over Pentagon Papers", *Washington Post*, 15 January. Viewed on 24 February 2011: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/14/AR2006011401165.html>
- 6 Leigh and Harding (2011: 224).
- 7 Martin Chulov and Helen Pidd (2011): "Defector Admits to WMD Lies That Triggered Iraq War", *Guardian*, 15 February. Viewed on 24 February 2011: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/15/defector-admits-wmd-lies-iraq-war>; Also Martin Chulov and Helen Pidd (2011): "Curveball: How US Was Duped by Iraqi Fantasist Looking to Topple Saddam", *Guardian*, 15 February. Viewed on 24 February 2011: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/15/curveball-iraqi-fantasist-cia-saddam?intcmp=239>.
- 8 "In their private exchanges, US diplomats dispense with the platitudes that characterise much of their public job; they give relatively frank, unmediated assessments, offering a window into the mental processes at the top of US power. The cables were, in a way, *the truth*" (Leigh and Harding 2011: 212, emphasis ours).
- 9 Ibid, p 249.

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Producing Truth

It is in this social milieu, defined by the leak problematic of truth, that WikiLeaks too appears, in this system of the production of truths of varying intensities, determined by the mode of leak effected. Unlike societies in the 1970s, our social body is defined by leaks; everything leaks, from surveillance tapes, wire taps, nudity on a remote beach, books, music, medicinal drugs and lives. Secrets and leaks are no longer governed by the state; there is an

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It should not be our effort to deny that Assange revealed secrets and that they were all true. But the appearance of WikiLeaks certainly changes our conception of secret and grants us an intensive conception of truth. Political action deriving from these truths is no longer possible if we assume a displaced problematic of truth, the espionage problematic. The light shone by Assange illuminates the entire epoch defined by the espionage problematic, since it shines from elsewhere. In the middle period of his research, Michel Foucault described the production of visibility, knowledge, and truth. To us, the production of secrets and extractions, and the sustenance of the intensity of truths all demand to be described. Our problematic illuminates that which is not visible, the sense of the hidden today. Yet what is hidden if everything secretes? WikiLeaks

2011: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/15/defector-admits-wmd-lies-iraq-war>; Also Martin Chulov and Helen Pidd (2011): "Curveball: How US Was Duped by Iraqi Fantasist Looking to Topple Saddam", *Guardian*, 15 February. Viewed on 24 February 2011: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/15/curveball-iraqi-fantasist-cia-saddam?intcmp=> 239.

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